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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are offered for ensuring the effectiveness of individualized instruction and mastery learning. One or two brief ideas are presented in each of the following areas: (1) homework; (2) after-school help; (3) supplementary corrective programs; (4) parent involvement; (5) enrichment exercises; (6) supplementary materials; (7) student tutors and student-led groups; (8) special small-group assistance in the classroom; (9) development of study skills using the SQ3R and PAR-4 techniques; (10) and utilization of other teachers as subject specialists. (DC)

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Is There "Time" for Mastery Learning ?

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Given the demanding nature of fully integrated Mastery Learning procedure, teachers legitimately question where they can find the time to guarantee that each student has the necessary prerequisites for the next learning task. To me this is the major challenge in Mastery Learning. Since teachers cannot provide tutorial services for students, they want to know how to maintain clear simultaneous instruction while providing individualization for the students who need it. I believe the solution lies in identifying the many resources teachers can use to remediate students at their point of frustration. Here are some available "tried and true" resources.

Homework

Clearly defined homework is an effective remediation tool when teachers differentiate between homework assignments which cause learning and those which assume learning. Both types of assignments should be given by design. For example, if students are assigned math homework, each problem should be annotated with the page and section to which students can refer for an explanation. Just spending a bit more time on the explanation may bring about an understanding of the learning task. Teachers can also anticipate which students will experience difficulty with specific concepts and adapt their homework assignment accordingly. The key is not so much in giving homework as in designing homework which reflects learning needs.

After School Help

Extra help before, during, or after school can provide the time needed for those students who cannot learn a specific concept during a regular class period. Here again, time, not the curriculum, is the variable. Research also indicates that it is sometimes advisable for students to report to different teachers other than their own for extra help. For example, in science, one teacher might handle laboratory problems, another equations, and still another the metric system. Departments can set up such an arrangement on a weekly basis. In reporting to a different teacher, students increase their chances of learning because they may be exposed to a different vocabulary, a different twist of terminology, and even a more appropriate teaching style.

Supplementary Correctives

Directing students to supplementary corrective programs may enable some to acquire the necessary prerequisite for the next learning task. Ongoing and timely communication between the various kinds of remedial teachers and the classroom teacher on the specific area of student difficulty will help provide certain students with the necessary time on task to master a problematic objective.

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Parents

Parents can often be instructional allies. Educators can convey their sense of urgency for student mastery on "Back-to-School Night" by describing what parents can do to assist the learning process. Subsequent written or oral communications from teachers to parents will also help parents work successfully to assist their children's learning.

Enrichment Exercises

On occasion, teachers might assign to students who have attained mastery of a specific learning task an enrichment exercise in the media center, library, or classroom. This, then, provides the teacher TIME to remediate other students whose assessment/feedback indicates they have not attained mastery of a specific learning task.

Supplementary Materials

Supplementary instructional materials in the classroom or media center may convey the clarity needed for those students who have not mastered a specific prerequisite, particularly if the instructional material corresponds with the student's learning style.

Student Tutors and Student-led Groups

Student tutors from the Junior and Senior National Honor Societies can, on a rotating basis, assist teachers in providing individualized remediation. This approach will also be particularly effective for those students whose learning style indicates a need for this type of instruction.

Class Captains, who have already mastered the specific learning task, can lead small groups. These students help those who need more time, allowing the teacher to work with those who need the most help. Teachers can ask students to help each other outside of class or during lunch. This helps convey the teacher's concern that all students attain the needed prerequisites.

Special Classroom Assistance

During a class period, teachers might consider grouping together a few students who are experiencing difficulty so that a particular concept can be re-explained with different words, charts or diagrams. The key is to find those words or illustrations which will ensure learning and to convey to them that teachers are not giving up on them.

Developing Learning Strategies

A major goal in Mastery Learning is to teach students to teach themselves. Thus, students become allies of the teacher in the pursuit of learning tasks. To achieve this goal, the SQ3R or PAR-4 formats are particularly appropriate. The common denominator of these techniques lies in developing questioning skills which force students to penetrate the concepts presented in the text before, during, and after the reading assignment. The SQ3R technique asks students to survey the material before reading it, then jot down questions they may personally want the text to answer for them. Following this they read the assignment and review it by asking key questions (such as, what was the author's main purpose?). Finally, students are urged to recite what they can remember to a friend or a parent.

The PAR-4 technique directs students to preview the materials so as to "soften" it up. This technique emphasizes the importance of outlining chapters by coaching students to assign headings of equal value in similar positions in the outline so that the author's structure can be easily identified. Students are then directed to ask a series of questions based on the outline; read the material, bearing in mind the questions they want answered; and record short answers to the outline questions, including a list of new words and their meanings. After the chapter has been read and recorded, students are to re-think the concepts by asking probing questions pertaining to inferences, applications, parallels, cause and effect, and extrapolations. Then, using the recorded written work, students should review the material immediately. (If the work is recorded in columns, students should fold their sheets in half, using the side that has the questions as a test.)

Other Subject Specialists

Teachers in the academic areas can ask assistance of teachers in special areas. For example, a social studies teacher may request the help of an art teacher in having students graphically design a timeline in their study of the American Indian. Or, a music teacher may request the assistance of a math teacher in explaining the concept of three quarter time to students who need more instruction. Tapping this resource provides certain students both more time on task and a different approach for learning the same objective.

Hopefully these ideas will assist principals and teachers who are implementing the concepts of Mastery Learning but are perplexed by the seemingly insurmountable obstacles to finding time for the necessary individualization. Mastery requires that we tap all the resources at our command so all students can confidently progress.